

Proper 18 (B)

Mk 7.24-37

In the region of Tyre, a Syrophenician woman asks Jesus to work a miracle in her daughter. In the region of the Decapolis, the friends of a man who can neither hear nor speak ask Jesus to work a miracle in their friend. And right here in the region of Columbia, South Carolina, we're going to ask Jesus to work a miracle in us.

The miracles of Jesus are almost always multi-layered affairs. What I mean by this is that more often than not any single miracle actually involves a series of related miracles. It's a miracle every time someone recognizes Jesus is the one who can help them and are able to surrender themselves to him. It's a miracle every time Jesus responds in a way that meets their needs and brings about transformation in their lives. And it's a miracle when the people go on to proclaim the good news of what Jesus has done for them.

Case in point: this morning's gospel tells us of an encounter between Jesus and a Syrophenician woman living in the region of Tyre. The people of Israel and the people of the region of Tyre didn't exactly get along; the Israelites and the Syrophenicians were old and bitter enemies. And yet along comes this pagan, asking for help from a Jewish rabbi: that's a miracle. We get a sense of how much of a miracle it is when Jesus himself at first resists the woman's appeal and tries to turn her away; he was willing to talk with a Samaritan woman, but apparently a Syrophenician woman was a bridge too far. So it's a miracle these two are able to connect at all.

And then we have a group of people from the region of Sidon coming to Jesus and asking him to help their friend, to help him with a problem that for all intents and purposes looks hopeless. The people of the region of Sidon were mostly Gentiles, so once again we see God's miraculous Spirit at work in the lives of these people, enabling them to recognize that salvation is from the Jews. They, too, approach this itinerant Jewish rabbi, this foreigner, and ask him for a favor they had no right to expect he would grant. That's not only a miracle of understanding, it's a miracle of humility and respect; that's God's Holy Spirit at work.

But that of course is just the beginning. The Syrophenician woman's daughter is beset by profound spiritual oppression and brokenness, and yet Jesus is able to deliver her without even getting close to her. The man unable to hear or to speak is delivered of not one but both infirmities; the barriers of disability are swept aside by the Spirit of God, and that which had been locked shut is now wide open.

And there's even more: as is so often the case in the gospels, the transformation of someone's life is followed by grateful proclamation and joyful witness. Mark doesn't tell us how the Syrophenician woman responded when she went home and found her daughter well, but I don't think it's much of a stretch to expect she would have been ecstatic. And what do you suppose she would have said to those who came around asking what had happened to her daughter? I can easily imagine their response when they heard the woman's testimony: "Wait a minute: you're saying she was healed by a *Jew*? And he didn't even *touch* her? How does *that* work? Truly there is a God in Israel." The gospel goes forth, and the miracle spreads.

And what about the friends of the man given the ability to hear and to speak? They're so excited, they're beside themselves. Jesus orders them to tell no one, but the more he tries to shut them up the

more zealously they proclaim it. “They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’”

The proclamation of the gospel in response to a miracle is as much a miracle as the miracle itself. That’s because we need God’s grace both to recognize what’s happened to us, and to give the glory to God and not try to redirect it to ourselves. Our inclination is to overlook God’s work in our lives: we chalk it up to coincidence, or luck, or to just about anything other than the grace of God. Or, if we’re feeling especially pleased with ourselves, we’ll chalk it up to hard work, or to perseverance, or to moral fiber, or to just about anything other than the grace of God. It’s a miracle when we’re able to look at some part of our lives and recognize, “God did that, and I give him the thanks and the glory.”

In the region of Tyre, a Syrophenician woman asks Jesus to work a miracle in her daughter, and her daughter is delivered, and the word goes forth. In the region of the Decapolis, the friends of a man who can neither hear nor speak ask Jesus to work a miracle in their friend, and the man is healed, and the word goes forth. And right here in the region of Columbia, South Carolina, we’re going to ask Jesus to work a miracle in us so that the word may go forth in new and powerful ways.

That’s really what this RenewalWorks thing is about: it’s about us asking God to show us where we are right now as a community of faith, where he is calling us to go, and what we need to do to get there. Every one of those things require that we ask God for a miracle. We need God to show us where we are; not where we *think* we are, not where we *would like* to be, but *where we are* in our life together and in our life with him.

We need God to tell us where he’d like us to go; not where we think we *should* go, maybe not even where we *want* to go, but where he would have us go to meet the needs of those to whom we have been called to proclaim the gospel. And we will need the miracle of God’s Holy Spirit to enable us to proclaim in word and in deed the work he does in our midst.

You’ve heard me talk about this RenewalWorks thing before, and you’ve seen it mentioned in the bulletin and in “Tidings,” and by now hopefully you’ve seen the article in the most recent issue of “Connections.” But next week we’re done talking about it; next week we do it. Next Sunday, the work begins.

Here’s how it happens: each and every member of the cathedral will be given an opportunity to complete something called a Spiritual Life Inventory. This inventory is designed to do one thing and one thing only: identify how we as a community of faith are doing at helping one another grow closer to God and move deeper into the Christian life.

Where are you in your relationship with God? Moving forward? Moving backward? Not moving much at all? Not sure? Where are we as a community? Moving forward? Moving backward? Not much either way? Not sure? We’re going to ask God to show us; we’re going to ask him to open our ears and our eyes and to deliver us from whatever may hinder us so we can discern the movement of his Spirit.

How does being a member at Trinity Cathedral help you grow in your faith? How does being here help you grow in your understanding of the scriptures? In your experience of prayer and daily devotion? In your dedication to community service and outreach? In the way you relate to other people? In the way you exercise stewardship over your time, your talent, and your treasure? Does

being here help you see each of these different areas of your life within the framework of your identity as a Christian and within the framework of the baptismal covenant?

Please note, we're not looking for right answers. We're not looking for exaggerated answers. We're looking for honest answers. Completing the inventory requires taking a good, hard look at your faith and being honest with yourself, honest with God, and honest with us.

The reason for all this soul-searching is so that we can—*all* of us, both as individuals and as a congregation—ask God to show us how he is calling us to grow. Where do we need a miracle? Where do we need to be transformed by Jesus? We may already know the answer to that question, or we may *not* know the answer to that question.

But be assured we are all called to grow. If you ask God to show you where and how he wants you to continue to develop and mature as a Christian, be ready for an answer because I guarantee the one thing you will *not* hear is, “You know, you’re doing just fine. I have nothing else for you; I’ve already given you all the grace and all the transformation you need. You are good to go. In fact, you’re a saint; they should name this place after you, not me.”

This isn't about beating ourselves up, and this isn't about making ourselves feel bad or making ourselves feel good or making ourselves feel anything in particular at all. This is about listening. It's about asking Jesus for a miracle, the miracle of recognizing the transformation that only he can give us, and the grace to surrender ourselves to him so that his will may be perfected in us, both as individuals and as a community.

Ultimately, all this discernment is intended to enable us to do one thing: to experience the miracle that happens when we are transformed and empowered in new ways to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed in this time and in this place. Like that Syrophenician woman, we want to find that when we go forth from this place where we meet Jesus and we return to our homes and to our work and to our schools and to our lives, we find ourselves experiencing a new measure of deliverance and freedom. Like that man from the district of Sidon, we want to leave this place astounded beyond measure by what God is doing with us so that we go forth zealously proclaiming a gospel of good news and healing.

We can't get stuck in the past, and we shouldn't long for a future that has not yet come; all we have to do is be as faithful as we can, here and now. That requires a miracle of discernment. It requires a miracle of commitment and surrender. But when we do those things, we will experience the miracle of transformation, and we will be equipped with everything we need to proclaim the gospel in word and deed to those around us and to testify to the fact that there is a God in Israel who brings deliverance and healing for all. May it be so in our midst, this day and always, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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